Book Review
Carlos Fraenkel, *Teaching Plato in Palestine. Philosophy in a Divided World*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, hardcover. ISBN 978-0-691-15103-8.. 221 pages.

REVIEWED BY FERNANDO SALVETTI
LOGOS KNOWLEDGE NETWORK, LUGANO (SWITZERLAND) & TURIN (ITALY)
LUISS BUSINESS SCHOOL/ROME & MACSIS-UNIVERSITY BICOCCA/MILAN (ITALY)

Can people imitate Socrates instead of killing him again? Can philosophy contribute to save human lives at least in some of the risky places that are expanding all around the world? Can practicing philosophy be useful outside the confines of academia? And can philosophy help turn tensions that arise from diversity (cultural, religious, and so forth) into a culture of debate? Which philosophical tools can contribute to having people formulating and answering each other's questions?

Carlos Fraenkel is mainly trying to find out if one can use philosophy to address real-life concerns and to have debates across cultural boundaries. He grew up in Germany and Brazil, and studied in Berlin and Jerusalem with "*detours*" through Sâo Paulo and Paris. Then he taught philosophy and religion at the University of Oxford and currently serves as faculty at McGill University in Montreal. As Michael Walzer notes in his foreword to the book (p. IX), he is a talented and innovative philosopher and historian of philosophy who is also interested in theological arguments. He dares to practice philosophy in "strange" venues, far from its familiar academic places, because he believes that philosophy can be useful to the lay public, to people that are not professional philosophers and who argue in ordinary language about a number of issues such as the best political regime, how one should live, the best moral law, the possibility to reach a true and definite knowledge of something, and God(s).

The title of the book is intriguing but a bit misleading: only the first chapter of the book takes place in Palestine; from there, he travels to Indonesia, New York, Brazil and Canada. Fraenkel's philosophical adventures happen—between 2006 and 2011--in five different places and with very diverse people: Palestinian students from Jerusalem, Indonesian Muslims in the local universities, Hasidic Jews in New York, Brazilian teenagers from poor neighborhoods, the descendants of Iroquois warriors in Canada… They turn to Plato and Aristotle, al-Ghazālī and Maimonides, Spinoza and Nietzsche (and a number of other thinkers) for help to tackle big questions: does God exist? Is piety worth it? Can violence be justified? What is social justice and how can we get there? Who should rule? And how shall we deal with the legacy of colonialism?

Fraenkel shows how useful the tools of philosophy can be—particularly in places fraught with conflict—to clarify such questions and explore answers to them. In the course of the discussions, different viewpoints often clash (p. XIII). That's a good thing, Fraenkel argues, as long as we turn our disagreements on moral, religious, and philosophical issues into a "culture of debate." He urges religious people who aren't bound by literalism, secularists who don't dismiss all religion as anachronism, and inquisitive types of all persuasions to try something. First, accept freedom of expression, recognize fallibility and revise received assumptions. And then plunge into debates about morality, faith, governance, rights and other matters that usually are divisive.

What mainly unites the classroom conversations is Fraenkel's skill in the art of posing questions designed to perplex and provoke—practicing an effective Socratic dialogue that engages

the broader public and other cultures. Conceived as a joint search for the truth, a culture of debate gives people the chance to examine the beliefs and values they were brought up with and often take for granted. It won't lead to easy answers--Fraenkel points out--but debate, if philosophically nuanced, is more attractive than either forcing our views on others or becoming mired in multicultural complacency—and behaving as if differences didn't matter at all. Of course, he admits, a culture of debate is incompatible with an approach to religious traditions that seek their truth in the literal meaning of the Bible, the Quran, the Vedas, and so forth. A culture of debate presupposes that religious and cultural traditions are open to interpretation and that interpretations, in turn, are open to revision.

What really matters, for Fraenkel, is freedom of expression as non-negotiable "liberal" principle: if citizens cannot say what they think without fear of punishment, a culture of debate is not possible. Within such a framework, a culture of debate can be built on the dialectical skill of engaging in a joint search for the truth and not at all on the "sophistical skill of making one's own opinion prevail over others." So it's central to the *practice* of philosophy, aimed at developing "techniques of debate" that are first of all based on "logical and semantic tools that allow us to clarify our views and to make and respond to arguments" – a contemporary version "of what Aristotelians called the *Organon*, the 'tool kit' of the philosopher." Equally as important is cultivating the "virtues of debate" that means "valuing the truth more than winning an argument and trying one's best to understand the viewpoint of the opponent" (p. XV). Trying to avoid misunderstandings, Frankel underlines that his proposal is not at all aimed at questioning the value of academic philosophy, because as a university professor he is also part of the academic *milieu*; moreover, his practical approach is not "a secular project where philosophy aims to usurp the guiding role of religion" because the most of his interlocutors are deeply religious.

What he is mainly aimed at, is a practice of philosophy (without sharing any particular philosophical worldview) that can cut across cultural boundaries "including the secular-religious divide." So, what really matters is enabling a process based on sharing the tools (from the maieutic tradition) that can help us to think through questions related to ourselves, our communities, and the world we live in—no matter which answers we ultimately settle on" (p. XVII). Mainly within the democratic countries where a key-issue is knowledge and how to use it, because to the extent that "democracy means self-determination on the basis of informed choices, developing tools for choosing and sharing information about available options seems the right thing" (p. 16).

Philosophy can be an extremely technical and complex affair, one whose terminology and procedures are often intimidating to common people and demanding even for the professional. Extracting from the philosophical body of knowledge some logical and semantic tools (as done also by others, even if with a more traditional academic approach: i.e. Baggini & Fosl, 2007 and 2010), as well as practicing a process enabling common people to debate, concretize a "can do" and empowering approach very promising—even challenging. It's so interesting as an approach because at least two millennia of philosophy (not only Western) have led to little consensus about the fundamental problems we, as human beings, are facing. Even when there is a hierarchy of principles and guidelines usually known as relevant to solve a critical issue, the way to apply them in the real world is normally disputed. So, better than trying to subsume the single cases under a general theory of reference—that implies leaving the philosophy pretty uniquely to the professional philosophers—facilitating the common people, by sharing relevant tools, to think about questions most relevant to the all of us is a valuable approach. An approach that, in the end, should help humanity avoid falling down to blind faith or gut instinct—say skepticism or nihilism--contributing to build an epistemic common currency (Lynch 2012; Salvetti 2013).

Such a common currency is lacking for instance in many Middle Eastern areas. Can philosophy "save the Middle East? – Fraenkel is asking. Yes it can, he answers, providing a framework and a language by which people can communicate even if they do not accept each other's religious commitments. It seems possible today as it was at the time of Maimonides and Averroes. The latter interpreted Islam as a philosophical religion, as Maimonides did for Judaism, and both contributed to create the right philosophical conditions to bridging cultures, instead of dividing and fighting. The key-point is: Fraenkel is not talking about one civilization "educating" another, but is pointing out that bridging traditions means focusing on intellectual configurations that, even if different, are largely shaped by the encounter of common elements. Building bridges requires going beyond the "monolithic" interpretations usually proposed by "fundamentalists" in order to "rediscover" a variety of positions that are normally available within a shared paradigm (p. 16). A job that could be summarized as such: building interpretations about interpretations, within a framework which gives prime attention to the role of symbols in constructing public meaning. In such a perspective, the practical philosopher plays a role very close to that of the anthropologist outlined by Clifford Geertz, trying to facilitate a common interpretation of the guiding symbols and narrations of each culture—seen as a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life (Geertz, 1973).

By the way, this perspective doesn't mean that some practical philosopher, by engaging people in the streets, is supposed to be able to change situations that are politically, socially and economically difficult. But means that, if practical philosophy would be part of large capacity building programs--like those usually managed by the international financial institutions (as World Bank, Inter-American Bank, Islamic or African or Asian Development Bank) in partnership with the involved national governments and local authorities (Salvetti, 2013)—a relevant percentage of the common people could improve a "philosophical" mindset and approach that could be of great help… Not only in the Middle East but everywhere people, for instance, are growing up "between two narratives that contradict each other" and led to confusion or conflict (p. 13): a situation that can generate an attitude fine with avoiding uncertainty, fixing in a rigid manner what is right and wrong, so reducing a lot the chances of bridging.

Uncertainty avoidance, accordingly to Geert Hofstede (1983, 1993, 2010; Salvetti 2014), reflects the extent to which the members of a society attempt to cope with anxiety by minimizing alternative representations. Countries exhibiting strong uncertainty avoidance index (UAI) maintain rigid codes of belief and behavior and are supposed to be intolerant about unorthodox behavior and ideas. In accordance with such a paradigm, weak UAI societies are expected to maintain a more relaxed attitude in which practice counts more than principles. So people in cultures with high uncertainty avoidance tend to minimize the occurrence of unknown and unusual circumstances and to proceed step by step by planning and by implementing rules, laws and regulations. In contrast, low uncertainty avoidance cultures accept and feel comfortable in unstructured situations or changeable environments and try to have as few rules as possible: people in these cultures tend to be "more pragmatic", because they are more tolerant of change.

Do we know how to understand the implicit, basic assumptions that guide people's behavior in different areas of our world? Do we know how to interpret the explicit norms and values that guide a foreign society? People from different cultural backgrounds are likely to have different attitudes towards ambiguity and uncertainty, hierarchy, achievement orientation, time and working with others. To live and work in our "glocal" (global and local) world, we have to be able to see the same things in many different ways. So we need some cross-cultural intelligence (Appiah 2006; Bertagni, La Rosa & Salvetti, 2010 and 2016). Being culturally intelligent means that when we engage others who do not share our cultural narratives, "we cannot rely on their authority, but are

compelled to argue for our views" so we have to "offer arguments that our interlocutors can understand because they are responsive to reasons, not because they belong to a particular cultural, religious, or political group". The principle at work is clear: the discussants have to convince each other by argument and "cannot appeal to their scriptures because none of them is recognized as authoritative by everyone" (p. 147).

Fraenkel wants all of us to defend what we believe and to engage with others who believe differently—and to make philosophy the tool of the defense and the engagement. "One thing my interlocutors around the world had in common was strong religious or cultural commitments that often clashed with my secular views" (p. XV). He chose the locations where he organized the workshops along various lines of conflict: "Israel and Palestine, Islam and the West, religious orthodoxy and modernity, social and racial divisions in Brazil, and the struggle of Indigenous nations with the legacy of colonialism". These conflicts give rise to fundamental questions on topics ranging from metaphysics and religion to morality and politics (p. XIII). Accordingly to Fraenkel, a culture of debate may be a better way of dealing with diversity than multiculturalism. Fostering a general aptitude—philosophical--for identifying and dealing with problems, as well as meta-cognitive abilities allowing people to make connections between "pieces of knowledge", thanks to the techniques and virtues of debate, would be a great social output (too many times very far from being reached).

By giving people the basic semantic and logical tools they need to clarify their intuitions and to analyze arguments for and against their views, philosophy could help extend and refine the debate that arises in a pluralistic society from conflicting interests, values, and worldviews. But can philosophy "really become part of ordinary life?" Wasn't Socrates executed for trying? Fraenkel's suggestion is to try by training the citizens "in dialectic debate from early on—say, starting in high school." If trained (a little bit, not really as philosophers as wished by Plato), might they react differently to someone like Socrates? Hopefully yes, because having been trained they could be able to handle with (some) care basic questions about their beliefs and customs, without becoming too disoriented and feeling to be falling down into corruption, atheism and nihilism (p. 85).

How do you argue about the hardest questions with reason and logic and respect for all the counterarguments? The answer proposed in the book is fallibilism—which has never been one of the popular "isms"—that is outlined in the second part of the book. According to fallibilists (Dewey 1916, Popper 1945 and 1987, Albert 1968 and 1978, Hayek 1982, Rorty 1989, Morin 2014 and 2015), we can never be absolutely certain that what we believe and value is right. At the same time, fallibilists assert the existence of objective norms in relation to which we can be wrong and to which we can get closer by critically examining our beliefs and values. To that end, "a culture of debate offers an excellent setting—enabling potentially a joint search for the truth. In fact and "although our moral, religious, and philosophical views widely differ, we share the desire to get them right". We can do that "from the armchair in our living room", even if we seem "to need some sort of unsettling experience that confronts us with our fallibility" (p. 145). Wherever you think, Fraenkel wants you to contemplate your possible wrongness—being at the same time aware that if either relativism or skepticism were true, "there would be no point in a culture of debate". We would be wasting our time "if we could not get closer to the truth by critically examining our beliefs and values" (p. 180).

The role of philosophers is not to guide, in accordance with Fraenkel, but to assist in integrating the practice of philosophy into our individual and social lives. The culture of debate does not come with a ready-made vision, but expects the visions to emerge from the debate. Multiple narratives are possible.

References

Albert, Hans (1968). *Traktat über kritische Vernunft*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, Revised edition 1991.

----- (1978). Traktat über rationale Praxis. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Appiah, Kwame A. (2006). *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: Norton.

Baggini, Julian and Fosl, Peter S. (2007). *The Ethics Toolkit. A Compendium of Ethical Concepts and Methods*. Oxford: Blackwell.

------- (2010). *The Philosopher's Toolkit. A Compendium of Philosophical Concepts and Methods*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Bertagni, Barbara, La Rosa, Michele, Salvetti, Fernando (Eds.). *"Glocal" Working. Living and Working Across the World with Cultural Intelligence*. Milan: Angeli.

----- (2016). *Employability. Knowledge, Skills and Abilities for the "Glocal" World*. Milan: Angeli.

Dewey, John (1916). *Democracy and Education*. The Pennsylvania State University: Hazleton, 2001.

Geertz, Clifford (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays*. New York: Basic.

Hayek, Friedrich A. (1982). *Law, Legislation and Liberty*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Hofstede, Geert (1983). Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values". *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 28:4, pp. 625–629.

----- (1993). Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 38:1, pp. 132–134.

----- (2010). *Think Locally, Act Globally: Cultural Constraints in Personnel Management*, in Bertagni, Barbara, La Rosa, Michele, Salvetti, Fernando (Eds.). *"Glocal" Working. Living and Working Across the World with Cultural Intelligence*. Milan: Angeli.

Lynch, Michael P. (2012). *In Praise of Reason*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

Morin, Edgar (2014) *Enseigner à vivre. Manifeste pour changer l'éducation*. Arles: Actes Sud, coédition Play Bac Éditions.

----- (2015). *Impliquons-nous ! Dialogue pour le siècle*, avec Michelangelo Pistoletto. Arles: Actes Sud.

Popper, Karl R. (1945). *The Open Society and its Enemies*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

----- (1987). *Toleration and Intellectual Responsibility* in S. Mendus and D. Edwards (Eds.). *On Toleration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rorty, Richard (1989). *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Salvetti, Fernando (2012). Formazione e capacity building con le istituzioni finanziarie internazionali. *Ticino Business*. Lugano: Camera di Commercio del Ticino.

----- (2013). Book Review: In Praise of Reason. *Philosophical Practice*. 8:2, pp. 1229-1233.

----- (2014). *Prefazione* a Hofstede, Geert, Minkov, Michael and Hofstede, Jan G., *Culture e organizzazioni. Valori e strategie per operare efficacemente in contesti internazionali*. Milano: Angeli.

Correspondence: salvetti@logosnet.org

Fernando Salvetti is an epistemologist, anthropologist, and lawyer from Turin (Italy) who lives in and travels to a number of countries all around the year for business and for passion. He is the founder of the educational company Logosnet (with operations worldwide, networking hubs and branches in 60 countries, headquarters and research centers in Italy, Switzerland, Germany and the US). Professor at various universities (currently Milan's "Bicocca" and "Luiss" in Rome), he mainly teaches and advises corporations and governments across the globe.